The Apostolic Commission

A Study in the Resurrection Mandates of the Lord Jesus Christ

Introduction: The Mandate That Cannot Be Silenced

There is a passage in the fifty-fourth chapter of Isaiah that the church has long associated with the expansion of God's kingdom through preaching the gospel to all nations. The prophet urges God's people to enlarge their tent, to lengthen their cords and strengthen their stakes, for they will break out to the right and to the left. Their descendants will possess the nations (Isa 54:2–3). The passage speaks of a mission open to everyone, with grace that goes beyond borders and a message meant for all people.

That vision mostly remained inactive in the established churches of eighteenth-century England. Missionary efforts had slipped into deep neglect, and the dominant theology of the period had, in some circles, become a strange refuge for complacency. If God intended to save the heathen, it was argued, He would do so in His own time and without human help. The Great Commission, for all practical purposes, had been quietly set aside.

It was against this background that a young Baptist cobbler and self-taught linguist named William Carey rose to preach on May 30, 1792, to a gathering of Baptist pastors in Nottingham, England. His text was Isaiah 54:2–3. His two headings have since become among the most memorable sentences in the history of the modern missionary movement: **expect great things from God and attempt great things for God**. The sermon did not immediately win the day. When Carey had earlier proposed for discussion at a Baptist ministers' meeting the duty of Christians to attempt the spread of the gospel among the heathen nations, the senior figure John Ryland Sr. cut him off with a sharp rebuke: "Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, He will do it without your aid or mine." But Carey would not be silenced. By October of 1792, the Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel among the Heathen had been established, a society that in time became known as the London Missionary Society. Through it, and by the grace of God, the gospel tent was indeed enlarged, and the message of Christ was carried to many nations.

Carey's story is not a detour from our subject; it is the entry point. What Carey understood, and what gave him both the passion and the courage to keep going against significant resistance, was the clear and binding force of the command that the risen Lord Jesus Christ had given to His church. He had read Matthew 28. He had read Mark 16, Luke 24, and the opening chapter of Acts. He saw in those words not a suggestion of an optional program but the permanent orders of the church, orders that have never been revoked and that carry the full authority of the risen and reigning Son of God. Our study takes those same words seriously and listens to them carefully..

The Lord Jesus gave what we call the Great Commission not just once, but multiple times during the forty days between His resurrection and His ascension into heaven. The different accounts in Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Acts are not simply duplicate reports of a single event. They seem to represent separate occasions, and the differences among them are revealing.

T. V. Moore, whose careful study of these commissions has long been a helpful guide, considers several of them part of a single extended series of appearances near Jerusalem at the end of the forty days. The commentator William Hendriksen views the Matthew account as a separate event in Galilee, and this interpretation is well supported by the text itself. The commission recorded in Luke 24 appears to have been given on the very night of the resurrection. Regardless of the exact timing, the Lord repeated this message again and again during those forty days, underscoring its importance. These are not casual words. They are deliberate and repeated commands from the one who defeated death and announced all authority in heaven and on earth.

I. The Uniformity and Scope of the Commissions

T. V. Moore, in his book *The Last Days of Jesus*, draws attention to a single fact that is common to all four of the apostolic commissions. When we read Matthew 28, Mark 16, Luke 24, and Acts 1 side by side, one theme stands out with unmistakable clarity in every passage: the gospel is to reach the nations. Each commission, in its own way and with its own distinctive emphasis, insists upon the universal scope of the apostolic mandate. Not one of them permits the disciples to think of the gospel as a message for a particular people. From the beginning of the risen Lord's words to the end, the scope of the commission is the whole world.

This is all the more remarkable when we compare these commissions to the earlier instructions the Lord gave during His time on earth. In Mark 3:14, the disciples were given authority to

preach, but that command was initially limited to the people of Israel. In Matthew 10:1–6, Jesus sends out the twelve with a clear instruction not to go among the Gentiles or enter any Samaritan towns, but rather to go to the lost sheep of Israel. In Matthew 15:21–24, we see the Lord Himself initially refusing to minister to a Gentile woman, explaining that He was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It appears from the earlier commission that it was, by deliberate divine plan, a Jewish commission.

But now, in the light of the resurrection and all that it has accomplished, the appointed time of blessing to all the nations has at last arrived. The promise long held out through the prophets, repeated across the centuries in the words of Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the Psalms, was now to find its fulfillment. It is not without significance that Matthew, the most Jewish of the four gospels, begins its genealogy with Abraham and works forward to Christ. For it was to Abraham that the covenant promise had been given in Genesis 12:3, reiterated in Genesis 18:18, and confirmed again in Genesis 22:18, where God declares that all people on earth will be blessed through him. The same word used in those Genesis texts for "nations" also appears in the Great Commission. What a fitting and glorious conclusion to the gospel of Matthew: the promise made to Abraham is now, through the risen and reigning Christ, to be fulfilled in the making of disciples from all the nations, both Jew and Gentile alike.

The sobering reality is that many nations still have not been reached. Based on current estimates from the Joshua Project and organizations like Global Frontier Missions, of the approximately 8.08 billion people alive today, about 3.42 billion live in unreached people groups with little or no access to the gospel. Sadly, this means roughly 42% of the world's population has never heard of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Great Commission remains unfinished. The Master's commands are still in effect.

II. The Authority of the Commission

Matthew 28:18–20 is organized around three uses of the word "all". **All authority** has been given to the Lord Jesus. He sends His disciples to **all nations**. And they are to teach these disciples to **obey all things** He has commanded. Everything in the commission flows from the first of these three: the unlimited authority of the risen Christ.

The word translated as “authority” here has a meaning that extends beyond simple power. It suggests the right and freedom to exercise that power. A helpful cross-reference is Matthew 9:5–8, where the same word appears in the account of our Lord healing the paralytic and forgiving his sins. The crowds marveled that such authority had been given to a man. From the very beginning of His ministry, the Lord exercised authority, and the crowds recognized it as something qualitatively different from the authority of the scribes. From the start, then, Matthew 28 establishes what the commentators call the warrant of the commission.

A natural question arises here. If Jesus Christ is God the Son, the second person of the eternal Trinity, in what sense can authority be said to have been given to Him? What can be given to One who is already Lord of all? T. V. Moore addresses this directly. The answer lies in the distinction between Christ's divine nature and His mediatorial office. It is as the God-man, the Son of Man, the one who became incarnate, suffered, died, and rose again, that the Father has conferred this authority upon Him. The high-priestly prayer of John 17:1–2 beautifully illuminates this, where Jesus links the authority the Father has given Him over all flesh with the giving of eternal life to all whom the Father has given Him. The one authorizing the disciples to go is the very one who has the authority to grant eternal life to all who respond to the message.

There are several passages in the New Testament that speak to this gift of authority as, in a sense, the reward of the Son's redemptive work. Philippians 2:5-11 describes how the one who emptied Himself and became obedient to death, even death on a cross, was therefore highly exalted by the Father, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow. Ephesians 1:18-23 speaks of the immeasurable greatness of God's power toward believers. This power was at work when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion. During His earthly ministry, our Lord exercised His divine authority in remarkable ways, raising the dead, healing the sick, commanding the winds and the waves, and casting out evil spirits. But the commentator D. A. Carson notes something greater in the post-resurrection claim. It is not that His authority has fundamentally changed, but that the sphere in which He exercises absolute authority has expanded to include all of heaven and earth. He is now the Sovereign Lord, King of Kings over all creation.

This is what William Hendriksen calls the great claim, and it serves as the introduction to the great commission. The disciples are instructed to go because the one who sends them possesses

all authority in heaven and on earth. As Hendriksen explains, they are to go because their Lord has commanded them, because He has promised to provide all the strength they need, and because He is worthy of the honor, faith, and obedience of everyone.

III. The Goal of the Commission

The goal of evangelism, as Jesus describes in Matthew 28, involves three key parts: making disciples, baptizing them, and teaching them. This may seem simple, but it conflicts with much of what passes for evangelism today. It's important to pause and consider how far the church has often strayed from this clear and complete command.

Many have encountered forms of evangelism that focus solely on persuading someone to say a specific prayer, walk an aisle, or sign a card. If that goal is achieved, the job is considered done. A booklet explaining spiritual laws is handed out, a sinner's prayer is recited, and the person is loosely directed toward a local church. While the origins of this method are not entirely without merit, the problem is that it does not align with anything Jesus actually commanded. Books have been written about the shortcomings of modern evangelistic methods, and the issue persists. One such book, Walter Chantry's *Today's Gospel*, made a significant impact when it was published and still offers valuable insight. The solution, however, is simply to return to the words of Jesus in Matthew 28.

The primary and commanding goal is to make disciples. This phrase translates into a single Greek word, and it appears in the imperative form. It is not a suggestion or aspiration; it is a command. The other parts of the commission, baptizing and teaching, depend on this first task being completed. There can be no baptizing without disciples, and no teaching without someone to teach.

What is a disciple in the biblical sense? Ernie Reisinger, in his work on evangelism titled *"Today's Evangelism: Its Message and Methods*," offers a definition worth remembering. A disciple is a learner of the teachings, a follower of the teacher, and someone seeking to be conformed to both the teacher and the teachings. In summary, Reisinger states that the goal of making disciples is to bring men and women into a right relationship with the Son of God. Our Lord's own words in Matthew 12:46–50 provide us with a vivid illustration. When told that His mother and brothers were waiting to speak with Him, He looked at His disciples and said that

whoever does the will of His Father in heaven is His brother, sister, and mother. In John 8:31–32, He tells those who believe in Him that if they hold to His teaching, they are truly His disciples, and that the truth will set them free. A disciple is not someone who has made a one-time decision. A disciple is someone whose life has been captured by the Lord Jesus Christ.

The second goal of the commission is to baptize those who have become disciples. If making disciples puts a person in the right relationship with the Son of God, being baptized brings that disciple into a right relationship with the church of God. Baptism has been well described as the badge of membership in the Christian church. It is an ordinance of the church and is closely linked with the evangelistic message from the very beginning of the apostolic era. We see this clearly in Acts 2:37–42, where those who received Peter's message were baptized and added to the number of those who continued in the apostles' teaching and fellowship. Baptism was not just a simple formality or afterthought. It is equally clear in Acts 8, where Philip preached to the Ethiopian eunuch using Isaiah 53 as his text. When the eunuch asked what prevented him from being baptized, it’s obvious that baptism must already have been part of Philip's message. The eunuch knew to ask for it because he had been taught to expect it.

This aspect of the commission has practical implications that influence our understanding of missions and the role of parachurch organizations. The goal of the missionary effort has always been the planting of churches because only the church can baptize. Organizations such as campus fellowships and interdenominational student groups have benefited many young people, and their rise is understandable, especially given how many congregations have neglected their evangelistic responsibility. However, they cannot fully fulfill the Great Commission because they are not churches. The commission was given to the church, which bears the primary obligation to take the gospel to all nations.

The third goal of the commission is to teach the disciples to observe all that the Lord has commanded. If making disciples establishes a right relationship to the Son of God, and baptizing them establishes a right relationship to the church of God, teaching them establishes a right relationship to the Word of God. The apostles had received their teaching directly from the Lord Jesus, and the commission laid upon them the obligation to pass on what they had received

T. V. Moore makes the suggestive observation that this aspect of the commission implies that the apostles would serve as the vehicles through which the commands of Christ would continue in the life of the church, carrying within them a promise of apostolic inspiration. Many of them did go on to write the remainder of the Scriptures, fulfilling precisely what the Lord had promised. The obligation to teach all that Christ has commanded remains with the church in every generation, and it must be grounded on nothing less than the full counsel of the infallible and inspired Word of God.

IV. The Comfort of the Commission

William Hendriksen, in his commentary on Matthew, divides this passage into three clear sections. The first, which he calls the great claim, corresponds to verse 18 and contains Jesus's assertion of authority. The second, which he calls the great commission, covers verses 19 and 20a and forms the heart of the command. The third, which he calls the great comfort, is in verse 20b and includes Christ's final promise of His constant presence.

It is significant that the passage ends with this promise of comfort rather than with a demand. Matthew's gospel is the most Jewish of the four, and it is the one most deeply filled with Old Testament promises. It is therefore fitting that this gospel concludes not with a command but with a word of reassurance: "surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The promise dates back to the very beginning of the gospel, when the child born of the virgin is given the name Emmanuel, meaning God with us. The gospel starts with that name and ends with that truth. The presence of the Savior with His people is not a temporary matter. It is an ongoing reality for the church in all her work.

T. V. Moore highlights two important features of the promise that deserve careful attention. The first is the verb tense the Lord uses. He does not say, "I will be with you." Instead, He says, "I am with you." This is a significant distinction. The phrase "I am" echoes throughout Scripture as a declaration of God's eternal self-existence. This is the one who is unchanging, who was, and who is to come. By using this form of the promise, our Lord affirms Himself as the eternal and unchanging God, whose presence with His people is as certain and unchanging as His own being.

The second feature is the phrase usually translated always, which Moore and Hendriksen both render more precisely as all the days, or day in, day out. The promise is not merely that the Lord will be present at the end of all things, though that is glorious enough. It is that He is present each day, through every circumstance, in every labor, in every trial, and even in death itself. The presence of the Lord is not reserved for the great moments. It accompanies His people through the ordinary events of their lives and service. It is a sufficient and inexhaustible resource for every commission He has given.

V. The Distinctive Emphasis of Each Commission

With the Matthew commission clearly in mind, it's important to note that the risen Lord did not give the same commission once and leave it at that. The other gospel writers and Luke in the book of Acts each record a version of the commission that emphasizes different aspects and character. T. V. Moore offers a helpful observation that each of the four gospels was written for a different audience, and this purpose is reflected in the varying forms of the commissions as each evangelist presents them. Together, the four commissions provide a comprehensive picture of the apostolic mandate in all its aspects.

VI. The Commission in Mark: The Results of Evangelism

The Gospel of Mark is widely viewed as having been written with the Roman or Latin reader in mind, and several features of the text support this idea. Jewish laws and customs, when they appear, are explained in much more detail than in Matthew, indicating that Mark's audience was less familiar with them. Many of the words Mark chooses are Latin-based transliterations rather than native Greek equivalents, with the word for centurion being a notable example. Mark's style throughout tends to be short and direct, which fits the preferences of the Latin mindset, and many believe that the gospel was written in Rome.

This characteristic brevity is reflected in the commission itself, as recorded in Mark 16:14–20. Several features of this commission deserve special attention. It is the only instance among all the commissions where the word gospel appears, here translated in some versions as good news. It also most clearly emphasizes the doctrine of justification by faith, a teaching thoroughly developed in Paul's letter to the Romans.

More than any of the others, Mark's commission emphasizes what Moore calls the results of the commission, or what we might equally call the results of evangelism. The commission goes straight to the core issue: going out into all the world and preaching the good news to everyone results in only two responses. Some believe and are saved. Others reject the message and face condemnation. The missionary apostle Paul clearly describes this same dual outcome in Second Corinthians 2:14–16, where he speaks of the fragrance of Christ as being, to some, the aroma of life leading to life; and to others, the aroma of death leading to death. John's gospel states it just as strongly: whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for the wrath of God remains on him. Life and wrath. Salvation and condemnation. In both outcomes, God is glorified; in the one case through His sovereign mercy, and in the other through the complete righteousness of His justice.

One further similarity between Mark's commission and Matthew's is the prominence given to baptism, though again the order is clear: faith comes first, and baptism follows.

VII. The Commission in Luke: The Doctrinal Content of the Message

There is something deeply instructive about reflecting on the timing of our Lord's entry into the world. Galatians 4:4 tells us that when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman and under the law, to redeem those under the law, so we might receive adoption as sons. That phrase, the fullness of time, is not merely decorative. Historically, there could hardly have been a better moment. J. Gresham Machen, in his introduction to the literature and history of the New Testament, emphasizes this when he describes the Roman background of early Christianity. The Roman Empire had created conditions ideally suited for the spread of a universal message: unified political authority, extensive roads and safe travel, a common legal framework, and enforced peace across vast areas.

Just as remarkable was the role of the Greek language. When Rome conquered the Greek world, the Greek language did not disappear. Rather, it continued as the common tongue of the educated classes and of commerce throughout the empire. A single language of great flexibility and precision was already in place to carry the apostolic message to every corner of the known world. God is the God of history, and He had been preparing the way for centuries.

Luke himself was a Greek-speaking Gentile, and his writings in both the gospel and the book of Acts reflect the literary quality and the love of careful reasoning for which the Greeks were so justly celebrated. The great commission, as recorded in Luke 24:44–49, is notably richer in doctrinal content than the others. The Greek mind, broadly speaking, was searching for wisdom, and the great philosophers had made that search a defining feature of their civilization. Paul addresses this directly in First Corinthians 1:20–24, where he speaks of Jews demanding signs and Greeks seeking wisdom, while the apostolic church preaches Christ crucified, a message that is foolishness to the Gentile and a stumbling block to the Jew, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

In God's own wisdom, the message delivered to the Greek mind through the early church's preaching addressed three issues that the proud Greek intellect would have considered beneath notice: first, the authority of Scripture as the word of God; second, the doctrine of an atoning Savior; and third, the absolute need for divine illumination to understand Scripture at all. It is a striking point that the very doctrines liberal theologians have persistently questioned in modern times are exactly these three: the authority of the Word of God, the necessity of Christ's atonement, and the dominance of human reason over the need for God's illumination. It is fascinating and instructive that ancient pride and modern pride are remarkably similar in their instincts.

Luke's commission is especially revealing about what it teaches the church regarding the doctrinal content of her testimony. Luke 24:46,47 identifies the three main themes that must be proclaimed in Christ's name to all nations: the cross, the resurrection, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

The cross, of course, assumes something absolutely essential to the message of evangelism, something without which the cross itself is meaningless, namely, the reality and seriousness of sin. Sin, in turn, presupposes a law that has been broken. Ernie Reisinger speaks clearly about the necessary role of the law in true gospel proclamation. The cross does not stand alone; it serves as the answer to a problem that must first be understood. Yet, ultimately, the message of the cross is one of abundant mercy. It proclaims the atonement, the central doctrine of the entire Bible, now revealed in the cross in its complete and final form.

The resurrection holds a central place in this commission and throughout the entire book of Acts. When the apostles looked for a replacement for Judas in Acts 1:21–22, the main qualification they listed was that the new apostle be a witness to the resurrection. Paul's sermon on the Areopagus in Acts 17:16–18 was met with mockery because he preached Jesus and the resurrection, words that sounded strange and unfamiliar to the philosophical Athenian audience, yet they remain God's message to sinners.

The resurrection shows the Lordship and exaltation of Christ. It proves victory over sin. Since the wages of sin is death, and Christ defeated death, He has conquered the very power of sin itself. As Peter declared in Acts 2:32-33, God raised this Jesus, and all of them were witnesses to that, and being exalted to the right hand of God, He received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit.

The third element of Luke's commission is repentance and the forgiveness of sins, preached in Christ's name to all nations. Repentance was no minor theme in our Lord's ministry. It was part of His message from the very beginning, as we see in Matthew 4:17 and Mark 1:14 and 15, and here at the end, He places it again at the center of what His witnesses are to proclaim. The apostles took this to heart. When the crowd at Pentecost, their consciences struck by Peter's sermon, cried out asking what they should do, Peter's answer was immediate: repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. T. V. Moore makes a point worth noting about the order in which Luke presents these doctrines: atonement comes before repentance. It is the mercy of God revealed in the cross that makes genuine repentance possible, not the other way around.

VIII. The Commission in Acts: The Power Required

We have now traced the apostolic commission through three of its four recorded forms. In Matthew, we found the goals of evangelism. In Mark, we found the results of evangelism. In Luke, we found the doctrinal content that is meant to fill the church's proclamation. The fourth and final commission, found in Acts 1:4–8, shifts our focus to the power required to carry it out.

The words of Acts 1:4–8 appear to be the Lord's final instructions to His disciples before the ascension, as verse 9 immediately follows with the account of His being taken up. The fact that these words were given as the very last words, combined with the fact that the commission itself

was repeated on multiple occasions during the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension, speaks with great emphasis to the importance of the apostolic mandate. These are not incidental instructions. They are the standing orders of the church, repeated and underscored so that there could be no possibility of their being forgotten or misunderstood.

The main focus of this final commission is the Holy Spirit's vital role in completing the task. The disciples were told to stay in Jerusalem until the Spirit was given. They were not to try to do the work on their own strength. The Spirit could not be given until the Lord had left and been glorified, and this promise of the Spirit was repeated many times in the gospel of John. Our Lord tells the disciples in John 15:26,27 that the Helper, the Spirit of truth, who comes from the Father, will testify about Him, and that they also will testify. And in John 16:7, He clearly states that it is better for them that He goes away, because unless He departs, the Helper will not come to them.

Having promised the Spirit, the Lord describes the scope of the commission in terms that must have been shocking to His disciples: Jerusalem, then Judea, then Samaria, and from there to the ends of the earth. The contrast with His earlier instructions could hardly be more striking. Not many months before, He had told them not to go among the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans, but to go rather to the lost sheep of Israel. Now, the risen and glorified Lord, clothed in all the authority given to Him by the Father, opens the doors to every nation, every people, every tongue. The commission is as broad as the world, and the Spirit of God is its sufficient power.

Conclusion

These four commissions, taken together, present the church with a mandate that is as comprehensive as it is demanding. The scope is universal: all nations, to the very ends of the earth. The authority behind it is absolute: all authority in heaven and on earth, given to the risen and exalted Son of God. The goal is nothing less than the making of disciples who are baptized into the life of the church and taught in all the counsel of God. The power for the task is not human but divine, the promised Holy Spirit sent by the Father at the request of the Son. And the comfort that sustains the whole enterprise is the promise of the Lord's own presence, not merely at the end of the age but all the days, through every labor and every trial, until the work is finished.

William Carey understood all of this. It was this vision, drawn from these very passages, that compelled him to press on when his peers advised him to sit down. It is with this vision that he dedicated his life to serving the people of India. The same vision has sent men and women to the most challenging places on earth in every generation, including some like Jim Elliot and his four companions, who paid the ultimate price. The mission of the church in making disciples is not a side concern; it is its main purpose, given by the Lord of the church Himself on the other side of the empty tomb.

In the New Testament, evangelism was not seen as a program or a special initiative. It was the natural and spontaneous expression of people who loved the Lord Jesus Christ and cared deeply for the souls of those around them. It was, in a sense, a reflection of genuine faith. The commissions given by Christ to His apostles are the words of the risen Christ to His church in every era. The question they pose to each of us, and to the church as a whole, is simply this: what are our reflexes? May the power of the Holy Spirit rest upon God's people today for the advancement of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.